

The Monarch and the Millennium

A New Interpretation of the *Alf* Coins of Akbar

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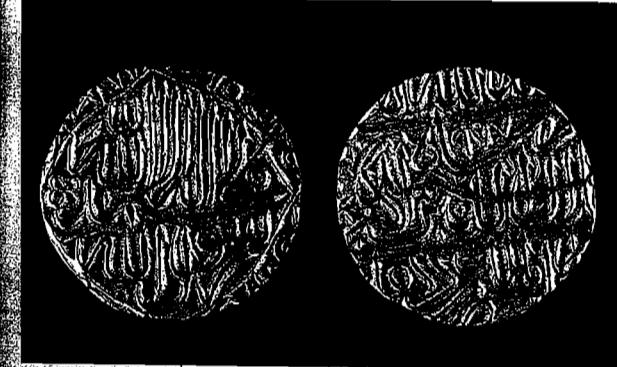
Medieval political orders in India were based on a relationship of power by which the sovereign was able to influence the actions of his subjects. In order for this relationship to work, it had to be expressed. In other words, power was by nature enunciative and required modes of communication to take effect. The present essay studies one such mode by which sovereign power was articulated in 16th-century India. It is based on the examination of a series of coins issued by the Mughal emperor Akbar (r. 1556–1605) to project a particular view of time, religion, and political sovereignty. Being primary and contemporary in nature, coins constitute part of the evidence that illustrates the transmission of religious and political ideas in the last quarter of the 16th century.

In various museum collections in the world today, there are a number of gold and silver coins (muhrs and rupees) of Akbar, with the date *alf* (millennium). In issuing the coins of the *alf* series, Akbar took some unusual decisions. First, the date

was inscribed in words and not in figures (figures 1 and 6). Second, if the intention was to refer to the year 1000 (*yak hazar*) of the Islamic calendar (*hijri* era), as is traditionally believed, the expression adopted for it (*alf*) was unconventional. Finally, and more importantly, Akbar ordered *alf* to be put on the coins in 990 *hijri* (1582 ce), or ten years before the date was due. The order was a major departure from the norm of striking coins in medieval India. Until then, all gold and silver coins had been struck with figures of the current *hijri* year (figures 2 and 3).

In an important passage of his secretly written history of the Mughal empire, Akbar's courtier and critic, Abdul Qadir Badauni, explains the motive for these extraordinary decisions while describing the events that took place in 990 *hijri* (1582 ce):

1. Silver coin (rupiya) of Akbar dated *alf* and minted at Urdu Zafar Qarin.
Obverse: the *Kalima* and invocations to the four caliphs.
Reverse: name of the king and regal protocol, date and mint.
The date appears in the second line from above, between "Muhammad Akbar" and "badshah".



2. Gold coin (muhr) of Akbar of the *hijri* era.
Obverse: the *Kalima* and invocations to the four caliphs.
Reverse: dated 977 AH (1569–70 CE). Minted at [Delhi].

And having thus convinced himself that the thousand years from the prophethood of the apostle (*b'isat i paighambar*), the duration for which Islam [lit. religion] would last, was now over, and nothing prevented him from articulating the desires he so secretly held in his heart; and the space became empty of the theologians (*ulema*) and mystics (*mashaikh*) who had carried awe and dignity and no need was felt for them; he [Akbar] felt himself at liberty to refute the principles of Islam, and to institute new regulations, obsolete and corrupt, but considered precious by his pernicious beliefs. The first order, which was given was to write the date *alf* on coins (*dar sikka tarikh alf navisand*) and to write the *Tarikh i Alfi* [History of the Millennium] from the demise (*rihlat*) of the Prophet. (Badauni II: 301).

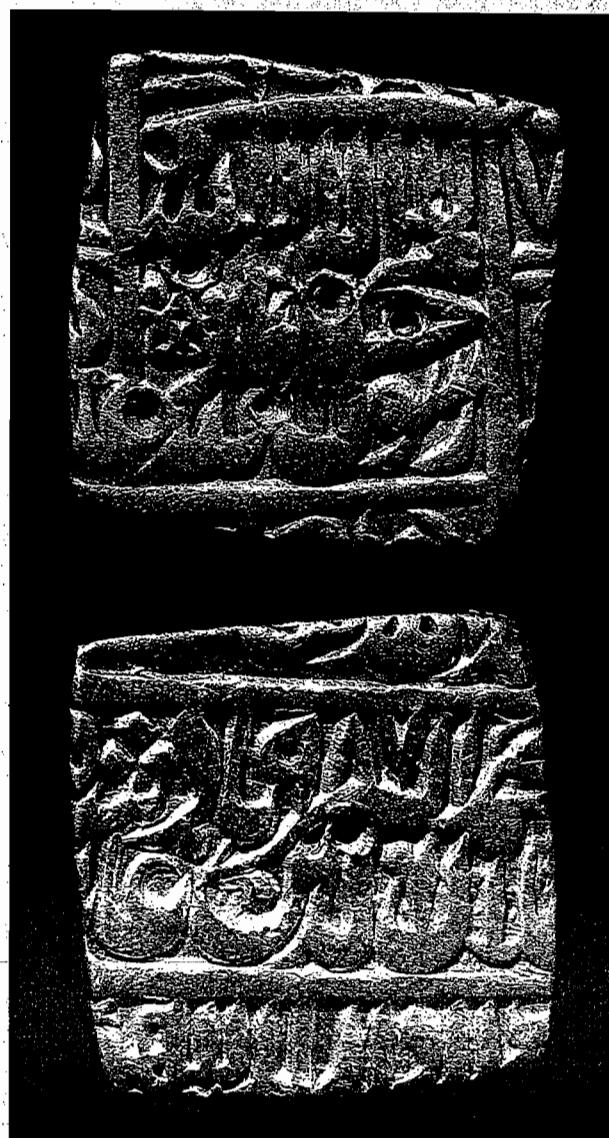
There are two important points which emerge from the above passage. First, Akbar reckoned the duration of Islam to be one thousand years from its advent (612 CE) and not from the event on which the Islamic calendar was based. That event, the migration of the Prophet to Medina (*hijrat*), took place ten years later (622 CE). It was therefore natural for the millennium of Akbar's reckoning to fall in 990 *hijri*. Second, Akbar announced the arrival of the millennium by issuing coins bearing that date as well as commissioning a work of history.

Without the benefit of Badauni's information, all *alf* coins would be naturally attributed to the year 1000 *hijri* (1592 CE) in museum catalogues and numismatic studies (Hodivala 1939: 562; Rao 1963: 749; Haider 1997: 55–65).

Two years later (1584 CE), Akbar introduced a new calendar, *ilahi*. In his description of this event, Badauni offers yet another interesting piece of

information. According to him, the date *alf* was used on coins even after the *hijri* calendar was officially abandoned (Badauni II: 306). In other words, the coins minted after 990 *hijri* still carried the date *alf*.

Badauni's statements are corroborated by numismatic evidence. Among current museum specimens, one cannot find silver coins from 990 *hijri* minted by six out of the seven regular mints of the Mughal empire (table 1). Gold coins are absent too, even from the Ahmedabad mint (table 2). Silver coins reappear from 998 *hijri* or 35 *ilahi* (1590 CE) in Delhi, and in the other mints a year after. Though Badauni does not expressly say so, a new mint name too replaced the actual mint names, this name being Urdu Zafar Qarin (camp associated with victory) (see figure 1). As we would expect from our explanation, the coins from Urdu Zafar



3. Silver coin (rupiya) of Akbar of the *hijri* era.
Obverse: the *Kalima* and invocations to the four caliphs.
Reverse: dated 987 AH (1579–80 CE). Minted at Lahore.

Qarin in tables 1 and 2 would be placed under 1000, and their number is the largest in relation to the respective output of the other mints in the preceding decade.

The textual and numismatic evidence presented above makes it clear that Akbar's decisions to mint the *alf* coins and commission the *Tarikh i Alfi* were based on a new interpretation of the terminal dates of the Islamic millennium. What the evidence does not explain is the source of the idea as well as the reason for persisting with the same date on the imperial coinage even after the critical year had passed. In the remainder of this article, I will try to answer these questions with the argument that Akbar was inspired in his innovations by a religio-political philosophy called Nuqtawiya (Pointism) which was Islamic in orientation and Persianate in character and preached distinctly unorthodox notions of being and time. The Nuqtawi philosophy and the sect which believed in it were founded in Iran by Mahmud Pasikhani at the end of the 15th century and acquired greater consistency in the last quarter of the 16th century.

The Nuqtawi ontology was based on monistic existentialism and metempsychosis. According to the founder of the sect and his followers (Mahmud wrote several treatises, but none of them has survived), everything in the universe originated from the atom of earth (*nuqtai i khak*) and was perpetuated by metempsychosis (*tanasukh*). After death, the human body was absorbed by the earth and reintegrated in living creatures. In this process, human qualities based on action (*amal*) and knowledge (*ilm*) were also transmitted from one being to another. This process culminated in the creation of a "unique person" (*shakhs i wahid*) from the elements of other dead and exalted persons. Such a person was capable of rising to the level of Allah since divinity was nothing but the manifestation of man in his ultimate essence (*murakkab i mubin*). Mahmud Pasikhani himself claimed to be the reincarnation on a higher plane of the Prophet Muhammad (Kaikhusrav 1262: 250-51; Algar 1995: 114-17; Amanat 1996: 287; Babayan 2002: 59, 62-63).

The Nuqtawis visualized time and the progress of humanity in terms of cycles of eras, the binary division of an era into periods of Arab and Persianate (*ajami*) civilizations, and the leadership of an ethnic prophet or expicator in each millennium of the era. The sect itself was founded during the last millennium of the Arab era and was expected to inaugurate the first millennium of the Persianate era. Mahmud Pasikhani claimed that

"the religion of Muhammad stands abrogated (*mansukh*), and the present [true] faith remains that of Mahmud" (Kaikhusrav 1262: 253). The Nuqtawis appealed to the cultural practices of pre-Islamic Iran and urged their followers to use the solar calendar and turn towards the sun while saying their special prayer (Kaikhusrav 1262: 251; Amanat 1996: 286).

Akbar's encounter with Nuqtawiya took place during his search for the best way to comprehend the nature of divinity and political sovereignty. Unlike his predecessors, Akbar possessed an unusual amount of imagination, inquisitiveness, and initiative, which drove him to delve deeper into the spiritual and gnostic aspects of the Islamic faith (Khan 1997: 79-96). The process of inquiry, which began in the 1570s is described by Badauni as follows:

The Empire had grown in extent from day to day, everything had turned out well, and no opponent was left in the whole world. His Majesty had become acquainted with ascetics and the disciples of his late Reverend Muin Chishti [of Ajmer] and passed much of his time in discussing the word of God and the word of the Prophet, and engaging in talks on mysticism,



4. Akbar holding discussion in the Ibadat Khana with divines. *Akbarnama*, MS. © The Trustees of the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin.

TABLE 1

Mughal Silver Coins (Rupees) in Museum Collections: AH 980–1007

980	9	1		4		3		9
981	8	1		1		1		9
982	6							14
983	8	1		1	2	6		12
984	9	1	1	6		5		9
985	10	11	8	5		7		4
986	6	1	16	10	2	1		7
987			14	13	8	10		10
988			12	10	1	3		9
989			9	8		2	2	5
990								11
991								7
992/29								8
993/30		3						11*
994/31								9
995/32								11
996/33								9
997/34								8
998/35		22						9
999/36		6		22				6
1000/37		5		34		35	18*	
1001/38		4		38		2	66*	
1002/39		8		28				58
1003/40		4		25				12
1004/41		12		25				26
1005/42		31		38				35
1006/43		12		26				21
1007/44	13	25		31				32

Ilahi year coins are italicized

* Either *hijri* or *ilahi* years

Source: Museum catalogues and unpublished collections.

TABLE 2

Mughal Gold Coins (Muhrs) in Museum Collections: AH 980–1007

980	3		1		3		5
981	18		1				5
982	13						11
983	2		4	2	1		5
984	3		1	5	1	1	3
985	2		3	3		1	2
986		8	1	1	1		3
987		2	1	6		1	3
988		2	7		1	1	3
989						1	1
990							
991							
992/29							
993/30							
994/31							
995/32							
996/33							
997/34							
998/35			1				
999/36							
1000/37							15
1001/38							
1002/39			1				
1003/40				1			
1004/41							
1005/42	3						
1006/43	1						
1007/44	1						

Ilahi year coins are italicized

The collections did not include any gold coins minted at Delhi.

Source: Museum catalogues and unpublished collections.

scholarly discourses and enquiries into philosophy and law (Badauni II: 200; Moosvi 1994: 60).

The ongoing spiritual quest resulted in a series of discussions held in a cell of his palace at Fatehpur Sikri, the Ibadat Khana. At first, the discussions were confined to issues of orthodox Islamic theology, but once the orthodoxy lost its aura of piety and infallibility ("they would call each other heretics and fools"), the scope was widened to include doctrines of other religions and heterodox and heretical Islamic sects and groups (figure 4). Akbar's own religious views matured as he queried scholars of different religions and sects and gathered information on various doctrines.

During the period of his experimentation and search for spiritual truth and the status of the monarch, Akbar met a member of the Nuqtawi sect, Sharif Amuli, in 1577 ce. Badauni describes the meeting between the two and offers a profile of Sharif Amuli, which suggests that the man was an ardent preacher of Nuqtawi doctrines and found a receptive audience among people generally interested in religion as well as the Shias (*mulhid i Iraq*). On his assumption of a messianic status (*mujaddid*), his reputation reached the imperial camp and led to a night session with Akbar in a makeshift prayer room (Badauni II: 245–48). Sharif also came close to Abul Fazl, whose religious thinking and style of writing appeared to have been influenced to some extent by the Nuqtawis (Rizvi 1975: 432, 493–94).

There were others too who transmitted Nuqtawi ideas to Akbar and Abul Fazl. A Nuqtawi scholar and poet from Kashan, Ali Akbar "Tashbihī", provided Abul Fazl with literature of the sect and authored a treatise for him. "Tashbihī" also wrote an ode for Akbar in which the emperor was urged to eliminate orthodoxy and traditionalism and establish pure monotheism (*tauhid i khalis*) (Badauni III: 204–06). The communication was not one-sided. In a letter addressed to a prominent Nuqtawi of Iran, Safiuddin Ahmad Kashi, Akbar enquired after his spiritual quest and gave assurances of royal favour and esteem to him as well as to the other leading light of the sect, Darwesh Khusrav (text quoted in Islam 1983: 367–71; English summary provided in Islam 1983: 357–58 and Islam 1979: 101–02). The letter was found among his papers when Safiuddin Kashi was executed by Shah Abbas I.

The Nuqtawi emphasis on monotheism and spiritualism and the antinomian (*ibahati*) character of the sect may have appealed to the sentiments of Akbar and Abul Fazl at a time when the two had

developed serious doubts about the relevance of the external edifice of Islam. The Nuqtawis mostly believed in religious poverty (*darweshi*) and wandering asceticism (*qalandari*) and their lifestyle sharply contrasted with the worldly appearances of the orthodox theologians. But there was a specific Nuqtawi doctrine on the millennium which Akbar and Abul Fazl may have found especially attractive. Badauni describes it, once again, in a characteristically caustic style:

In this year [1579 ce], low and mean people, learned in appearance but ignorant in reality, argued on the basis of false premises that His Majesty [Akbar] is the present Lord of the Age (*sahib i zaman*) who would eliminate all differences and antagonisms within the seventy-two sects of the Muslims and [between them and] the Hindus. Sharif [Amuli] presented evidence from the treatises of Mahmud Pasikhani about his declaration that in the year 990 a person (*shakhs*) would abolish falsehood (*batil*). All interpretations [of the prediction] identify the person as the Lord of the True Religion (*sahib i din i haq*) which [expression] adds up to 990 by the reckoning of Islamic numerology (*ba hisab i jumma*). Khawja Maulana of Shiraz, the heretic specializing in the art of occult prognostication (*mulhid jafardan*) came [to the court] with a treatise written by some of the Sharifs of Mecca in which authentic traditions of the Prophet were quoted to the effect that the duration of 7,000 years for which this world would last is over and the promised messiah is going to appear (*zuhur i mahdi i mau'ud*). Shirazi also offered [to Akbar] his own treatise [on the subject]. The Shiites also illustrated these absurdities on the basis of traditions transmitted from Ali, the commander of the faithful.... These insinuations became the basis for [Akbar's] claims to Prophethood in all respects but name (Badauni II: 286–87).

It can be seen from the above passage that as the Islamic millennium drew to a close, the intellectual climate of Akbar's court was taut with expectancy of the end of the old era and the "need for the rejuvenation of the True Faith by a person claiming near-prophetic status" (Ahmad 1964: 168). Ideas about the apocalyptic year and the identity of the millennial man were well entrenched in Islamic eschatological traditions and had been variously interpreted by the Nuqtawis, Nizari Ismailis, Shias,

and Sunnis (Madelung 1995: 1230–38; Rizvi 1993: 68–75). But it seems that Sharif Amuli took the lead in specifying that the millennial year was 990 *hijri* and that the promised messiah was the Mughal monarch, Akbar. Badauni mentions elsewhere that another noble of Nuqtawi persuasion, Sani Khan Hirawi, made similar claims based on the sayings of Mahmud Pasikhani. According to Sani Khan, Akbar was indeed the promised person (*shakhs i ma'hud*) who would reveal his cosmic identity in 990 *hijri* in accordance with the numerical values of the letters comprising the word *shakhs* (Badauni III: 206–07).

The Nuqtawis reckoned the duration of Islam from its origin rather than the year of *hijrat*. The time span between the first year of the advent of Islam and 990 *hijri* constituted one thousand lunar years and fitted with Islamic millennialist beliefs. According to the calculations done by Mahmud Pasikhani, 990 *hijri* was the year of the "greatest conjunction" of two superior planets, Saturn (*zuhal*) and Jupiter (*mushtari*), which took place every 960 solar years and precipitated epoch-making events. Significantly, there was also a belief among 16th-century Nuqtawis that the effects of this conjunction would extend from 990 *hijri* to coincide with 1000 *hijri* (Babayan 2002: iii f.n. 42; 3; 40 f.n. 8). This appears to be a way of reconciling the Nuqtawi millennium (612–1582 CE) with the traditional Islamic millennium (622–1592 CE).

Akbar's response to the Nuqtawi and other millennialist prognostications is difficult to gauge even though Badauni bemoans the impact of

"heretical" ideas on Akbar. Abul Fazl passes over the entire matter perhaps because it did not quite fit in with the vision of the monarch and the Mughal empire that he ultimately developed. It is, however, possible that for a brief period, Akbar found the Nuqtawi suggestions of the exalted monarch and the exact timing of his



5. Gold coin (muhr) of Akbar of the *ilahi* era.
Obverse: *Allahu Akbar Jalli Jalala*.
Reverse: date and mint – 49 Shahrewar *Ilahi*, *Darul Mulk Delhi*.
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appearance appealing and useful (Habib 1998: 334). The idea conjoined spiritual authority with temporal sovereignty and concentrated unlimited powers in the hands of a single individual. In the past, the perceived power of the promised messiah and the inevitability of change had attracted a large following among the believers. If Akbar had decided to put his faith in the idea and wished to communicate it to his subjects, then one effective way of achieving this was to inscribe the cosmic expression *al-f* (millennium) on the gold and silver coins which circulated in his name throughout the empire. Akbar followed the logic of the Nuqtawi doctrine that 990 *hijri* symbolized the beginning of an end and that the apocalypse would work through the decade and take its full effect after coinciding with the *al-f* of the Islamic calendar. Each year after 990 *hijri*, therefore, was in essence an *al-f* year until the date came round. The policy of minting *al-f* coins year after year can be ascribed to this particular piece of Nuqtawi dogma.

The frozen numismatic date served yet another important purpose which was not ideological but monetary (Haider 1997: 59–60). Mughal money-changers (*sarrabs*) levied discounts (Hindi *batta*; Pers. *arf*) on gold and silver coins on account of their year of mintage and place of issue. The state prohibited this practice since it snapped the link between weight loss and exchange value. In 1582, Akbar initiated a system of imperial control in which the *sarrabs* were forced to exchange gold and silver coins in accordance with officially prescribed rates of discount (Haider 2005: 132–34). Another way of regulating the exchange business seems to have been to deny the money-changers any opportunity of levying discounts on coins belonging to particular years and mints by precluding any mint identification along with removing differences of years (all coins being *al-f* coins and from Urdu Zafar Qarin).

Somewhere along the line, possibly around 1590 CE, Akbar abandoned the *al-f* experiment and switched over to a new system of dating coins and contemporary events. This was first communicated with the introduction of a new era, called *ilahi* and based on a solar calendar, as opposed to the lunar *hijri* calendar, in 1584 (29 *ilahi*/992 *hijri*). Coins were struck with the *ilahi* dates and months from 1590 (35 *ilahi*/998 *hijri*) on a regular basis although the inaugural issues appeared as early as 1585 (30 *ilahi*/993 *hijri*). The Islamic epigraphy on the coins (*Kalima* and the names of the four caliphs, see figures 2 and 3) was replaced with the legend *Allahu Akbar Jalli Jalala* (God is great. Splendid is



6. Gold coin (muhr) of Akbar dated *alif* and minted at Urdu Zafar Qarin.

Obverse: the *Kalima* and invocations to the caliphs.

Reverse: name of the king and regal protocol, date and mint. The date appears in the second line, between "Muhammad Akbar" and "badshah".

His glory) (figure 5). Abul Fazl attributes the introduction of the new era to a drive to standardize the diverse regional systems of dating events, but he also mentions that the *hijri* era was replaced because of its "ominous signification" (*nakami i agahi bakhshad*) (Abul Fazl 1927: 29). It seems that the decision was inspired, once again, by a change in the world-view of the monarch. Akbar was now experimenting with a new set of ideas based on the pantheism of Ibn i Arabi, the Ishraqi philosophy of divine light, and the social contract between the king and his subjects which crystallized in the doctrine of absolute peace or *sulh i kul* (Habib 1998: 330–36). Based on reason and reciprocal exchange, the new notion of sovereignty proved more enduring than the millennial dream of accomplishing an ideal society within the framework of Islam.

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FIGURE ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

All coins from the collection of the National Museum, New Delhi. Photographs courtesy National Museum.